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## Columbus: Courageous Explorer or Just Good at PR?

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# *The University of Dayton*

## *News Release*

Sept. 10, 1992  
Contact: Rosemary Harty

### **COLUMBUS: COURAGEOUS EXPLORER OR JUST GOOD AT PR?**

DAYTON, Ohio -- Christopher Columbus, many historians agree, probably wasn't the first European to step foot in the Western hemisphere, but he got the credit. In fact, he probably went to his grave unaware of the enormity of his discovery, a University of Dayton historian says.

"He just happened to be better at public relations than the other discoverers," says Julie Welsh. "He was a clever politician who survived the snake pit that was the Spanish court in the 15th century and got the Spanish monarchs to fund his enterprise. And when he returned, he grabbed the glory."

Welsh will lead a special 11-week course at UD on "1492: Spain, Columbus, and the Americas." The course brings together faculty from disciplines including music, art, religion and political science, and explores the impact Columbus' voyage had on both sides of the Atlantic. It is part of several community and University events planned this fall to mark the Columbus quincentennial.

In her research for the course, Welsh found the story on Columbus greatly altered since her grade-school days, when history books portrayed him as one of the greatest heroes of world history.

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The revised Columbus, Welsh said, doesn't occupy so prominent a place in today's history texts. Yet he is still a fascinating historical figure who was a good sailor, but a poor administrator.

One angle Columbus used to loosen Queen Isabella's purse strings was the promise of gold he would bring back for the Spanish court. That wealth could help the Spanish monarchs -- who were expelling Muslims and Jews from the country as fast as they could -- conquer Jerusalem, Welsh says. Columbus truly believed he was on a "mission from God," Welsh says. The explorer named his first colony in the West for Queen Isabella, in gratitude for her help.

Columbus' controversial legacy -- oppression, exploitation and disease brought to indigenous populations of the Americas -- has cooled the fervor among some Americans to celebrate the quincentennial. In Spain, however, the celebrations will be grandiose and unapologetic. Columbus' voyage and the wealth it brought Spain transformed the country from a backward nation to a leading world power in the 16th century.

In 1892, Americans celebrated the 400th anniversary of Columbus with jingoistic zeal and displayed America's genius at the Columbian Exposition and World's Fair in Chicago. "People couldn't say enough good things about Columbus," Welsh said. "Today, people are divided on Columbus, making the quincentennial more controversial than the JFK assassination."

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For interviews, contact **Julie A. Welsh** at (513) 229-3716 or (513) 222-7859. For more information on "1492: Spain, Columbus, and the Americas," contact the UD Continuing Education department at (513) 229-2347.